

Michael Gilbert

Professor Jones

GER 101

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Marcus Richter's presentation "Freedom without Walls"

My wife and I attended this event Thursday night which consisted of a roughly one hour powerpoint presentation with cookies and soft drinks. The presentation focused on what it was like growing up in the German Democratic Republic (GDR). He described his life there as being normal, they had birthdays, parties, music, and pretty much everything else and never really thought things were that bad. He also told us that the GDR had to pay Russia for the war, while W. Germany received money in the form of the Marshall plan, and that this was the reason for the material differences in the country. Then he walked us through life in the GDR.

First of all, he said that feminism was farther ahead in the GDR so women were encouraged to work outside the home much more which meant that kids were raised in free day cares where they basically started their education. He had a nice picture to share which illustrated his point showing a group of children in a small room, several being taught to use the toilet and others learning to brush their teeth. He then described that the first books you learned to read in the GDR had references to the party, by this he meant the Social Unity Party of Deutschland (SED), and that from then on, your education was heavily influenced by the SED. "School: math, science, party is great." is how he described it. One would learn about all the regular subjects but it was important to be a "Young Pioneer" and then become part of the "Free Youth of Germany," which seemed like communist versions of the cub scouts and boy scouts, to show your loyalty to the party. Herr Richter did not seem to have any bad feelings about this system and even said that these groups and the other party activities a young person took part in were fun. He was 18 when the wall came down in 1989 which was a relief to him because in order to go into a university a man would have to serve in the army first, which he admitted he was not cut out for. He told us that he thought a lot about going into the army. He said that going into the army almost certainly meant going to the border and that what he thought about was if he could shoot one of his fellow citizens if they tried to get out of E. Germany. His choices were to shoot the person or go to prison, and that he reached the conclusion that he probably would have shot the person. He told us that people could get a lot of vacation time to go anywhere they wanted inside the GDR and Czechoslovakia (the only other country they could easily travel to) and that production was so highly prized by the party, factory workers usually made more than most educated people there. He also told us that you did have to worry about who you talked to though. Apparently the secret police we think of when we think of states like the GDR were a strong presence and Herr Richter encountered some of them himself and was always suspect of friends who might report him for any joke or criticism he might have of the SED. Because just saying anything bad about the SED, a citizen could get put in prison and the party made the public aware that the prisons were not good places to be in order to instill fear in the public. Herr Richter never told us that he got in trouble with the secret police but did give us a personal story which showed the kind of atmosphere there was concerning the party. There were pictures of Erich Honecker (the president of the GDR) on every wall as he put it and one

day he got into an argument with a school friend that the picture was of Helmut Kohl (Chancellor of West Germany) until a teacher's aid of sorts came by and settled the dispute by telling him that it was indeed Erich Honecker. He actually got in trouble at school for watching West German television because that is what he had watched which made him confuse the two leaders. Furthermore, several years later when he came back to that school as an adult and met with some of the faculty, they remembered this incident and let him know that it was on his personal record.

He concluded that the reunification was difficult for most normal people in E. Germany and that unemployment went from 0% to 25-30% in the years afterwards. Also, everything the SED, from day care, to education, to disability benefits had to come from somewhere else, so this was a major problem and made many people feel nostalgic for the former government. Since the government owned most of the business in the former E. Germany, they were bought up by foreign companies, usually W. German ones, which worried some people. All in all, I found the whole presentation to be informative, and he did a good job of making it funny as well, sometimes unintentionally, but nonetheless it was entertaining and gave me a good second hand look into life in E. Germany.